

Welcome to the Division of Disease Prevention: Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) Among Veterans



It is estimated that between 120,000 and 135,000 Virginians suffer from chronic (lifelong) liver infection caused by the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV). The liver is one of the most important organs in the body, and is responsible for over 1,000 chemical and metabolic functions critical to survival. HCV infection can last for decades without signs or symptoms while it is destroying the liver. The above number of HCV infections represents between 1.5 and 1.8 percent of Virginia's population. Approximately 4 million people are infected with HCV throughout the entire United States.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has a significant retired military population, about 785,000 people (2000 Census). It is possible that between 12,000 and 14,000 of these retirees are infected with chronic HCV. About 25-30% of military retirees use the Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital system for general and specialty medical care.

The VA system has an outstanding HCV screening and treatment program. Most patients are screened for HCV at hospital intake. Since 2001, the Richmond VA has treated between 300 and 400 HCV patients with chronic liver disease. Treatment of HCV patients is becoming more aggressive. This means that patients who were once considered poor treatment candidates are now *more likely* to be treated. Examples of patients who were considered poor candidates for treatment are

- persons with cirrhosis (degenerative liver disease)
- persons with psychiatric conditions like depression
- persons in methadone (drug) rehabilitation programs
- persons who have had liver transplants

This is important because 4 to 5 percent of those with HCV will eventually need a liver transplant. The Richmond VA is one of only four VA hospitals nationwide (Pittsburgh, Portland, Nashville, and Richmond) to perform complete liver transplants on veterans with HCV. Of the approximately 7,000 liver transplants performed each year in the United States, 150 are done at these four sites.

Review Veterans Administration HCV Programs by clicking directly below:

- <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/vahep?page=home-00-00>

Review the three HCV Programs at Virginia's Veterans Administration Hospitals by clicking directly below:

- Richmond: <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/facility.asp?ID=112>
- Salem: <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/facility.asp?ID=116>
- Hampton: <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/facility.asp?ID=57>

Review Veterans Administration Liver Transplantation Program by clicking directly below:

- <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/vahep?page=tp08-03-rr>

One interesting note about HCV rates among veterans is that studies among veteran populations have historically found rates of HCV in the range of 10-20%. Because most of the studies were completed in VA hospitals whose patients are more at risk for HCV, researchers concluded that people in the military have much higher rates of HCV than the general population. However, this was incorrect. A very large study in 2001 found much lower rates of HCV in the military and among veterans. This study examined *all* veterans for evidence of infection with HCV and not just those who use the VA Hospitals. In fact, the rate of HCV among the total military population studied (veterans and active-duty) was actually lower than the rate for the civilian population in the United States. These low rates of HCV among military populations are most likely due to four factors:

- Strict entry standards which include testing for HIV and illegal substances prior to recruit training.
- Routine, randomized drug screening throughout military service.
- Regular medical screening, clinical examinations, and HIV examination of all active-duty and reserve personnel.
- Physical performance testing every 6-12 months which helps to identify chronic health problems.

Rates of HCV Among Different Military Groups*

HCV among 2,000 **retirees** (average age 44): **1.7%**

HCV among **Vietnam-era troops still on active duty** (average age 47): **1.0%**

HCV among 2,000 **reservists**: **0.70%**

HCV among 10,000 **active-duty troops**: **0.48%**

HCV among 2,000 **recruits**: **0.10%**

NOTE: The relatively low rate of HCV among Vietnam-era troops is not representative of all populations of Vietnam veterans. Indeed this group was very healthy, as demonstrated by their ability to serve on active military duty for a prolonged time (at least 23 years).

*Sero-prevalence study in *Am J Epidemiol* 2001;153:764-70